

SERMON TRANSCRIPT 2/26/84 (10/8/2017) Delivered by Mark Utzinger, written by his late father, the Rev. Harold Utzinger.

The message I share with you this morning comes out of years of searching for answers. I am not saying that I do have the answers to these questions, but I do have some thoughts that might be helpful to some of you. In relation to the age-old question, dating back to the pre-Christian era of the Old Testament, the book of Job, one of the great hurdles for every Christian has been this simple question, why? Why is there evil and suffering in a world which is supposedly created by a good and loving God? It is a question that every honest person of faith has asked at some point in their life.

In the story of Job, who was a wealthy man, a good man, who for some unforeseen reason lost everything he had, his home, family, wealth, and status. He couldn't understand why a good God would inflict evil upon him. The book of Job is an attempt to answer the question, why. His three friends gave him answers but they did not satisfy Job.

Why does a good God allow this?

Thomas also asked, "O Lord, why does thou cast me off? Why does thou hide thy face from me, afflicted and close to death from my youth? I suffer and I am helpless, O Lord, why do you allow such evil?"

Even our Lord on the cross asked this age-old question in the agony of death, "My God why hast thou forsaken me?" It is a current, constant question.

Take the example of a little 3-year-old riding her tricycle in the driveway of a suburban home. Her dad is in a hurry to get to work. He backs the car out of the garage, and in a split second of time, this little life is snuffed out. Certainly, any thoughtful Christian would ask why? Why does a good God allow such a situation to happen?

So often, well meaning people will give us an answer, "It is the will of God." Now, if this is true, I must say in all honesty, I cannot believe in your God. I cannot love your God, God must be a heartless tyrant. This God is not Jesus Christ.

So what I am going to suggest this morning is that tragedy and affliction are not the will of God, but instead God's will for us is goodness and wholeness and life.

Let me clarify this. To achieve goodness, and wholeness, and life; affliction and even death, may have to take place. In order for immortality to be reality, there has to be death. The Resurrection was preceded by crucifixion; good can and does often come out of evil. But I am saying that evil is never the will of God, even as a means to an end, and even as some of the Old Testament writers felt that it was.

Christ taught us that illness is not pleasing to God. Jesus healed the lame, the blind, and he commanded his disciples to do likewise. Jesus taught us that hunger is not God's will. Jesus fed the hungry. Jesus taught us that death, is not necessarily God's will. On occasion, he raised the dead. Jesus taught us that God's will is to bring life out of death, to take the broken and torn fragments of life and put them back together again into wholeness. This is the meaning of the resurrection.

I have found in my ministry that people can really get carried away in their interpretation of what is the will of God. I find there are basically three arguments they give.

First they believe that God does this thing, whatever it may be, to bring about some good. The words of Scripture most often quoted and abused is, Romans 8:28, "We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." Now there is truth in this verse, but it is very hard for the father who just crushed the life out of his child to have someone quote the verse to him. I think we as Christians must be very careful with this idea that good comes from evil because it is essentially saying, the end justifies the means. And I'm not sure that God is like that.

Second they believe that God uses a bad thing as a lesson for us to learn something good. Maybe it makes us strong and courageous. Now there is an element of truth in this. However I have a hard time accepting that. We hear people say God will never give us more than we can bear. But you will notice that this is said by people who have successfully carried a burden, not by those contemplating suicide. A pastor who that very week learned that his six year old daughter was dying of bone cancer made the following observation in his sermon. He said, "Human beings react to affliction in one of three ways, 1. They adjust and they bear, 2. they mal-adjust - sometimes to the point of going insane, or 3. they die. I have never heard that proverb quoted, "God will never give us more than we can bear" by a person in a mental institution or in a cemetery.

Think about that. There are things that happen to people that are more than they can bear. They learn no lessons from them. I would warn you as a Christian, to be very careful with that type of a statement because it is dangerous and it is unsupportable. The very statement is wrong, because God does not give affliction.

Third, there are those who talk about the will of God, saying that God uses evil as a form of punishment. How often I have heard this. I remember how that applied to my own experience. About 31 years ago, April 11, 1953, I was traveling in a group of seminary classmates in a 45 passenger, diesel chartered bus on a day very much I like today, and the highways were snowy and wet in Kansas. We were coming down a grade and approaching a bridge, and the bus was traveling too fast. It slipped out of the center line and hit a loaded gravel truck head on. I was sitting behind the driver, and behind me was Paul, a friend of mine from Minnesota, who was planning to go to Japan as a missionary upon graduation from seminary. Obviously, I lucked out, with only a broken back. But Paul was killed. I remember some well meaning people from a church in that town coming to my hospital room, upon hearing of his death saying, "What great sin did Paul commit that God would take his life like that?" I remember how negatively I reacted to that suggestion. What kind of God did they believe in, that would take a life like that?

How often have I heard people say in the face of disaster, 'Oh what have I done to deserve this?' I am sure all of you have heard this as well. And in a certain way, there can be an element of truth in this. Job's friends were firm believers in this idea, they tried to convince Job that he had brought his misfortune upon himself through some sin. But Job couldn't think of anything in his life which would evoke divine displeasure. This whole idea can be ludicrous.

If you are a Minnesota Twins fans, you may recollect that in 1968 they lost the pennant that year to the Boston Red Sox. And in the estimation of many people, they were the best team in the league. The Sports Illustrated Magazine had a letter written by a woman in Annandale MN, in which she said, "I believe that God guides our destiny in all times and all places. The Twins were virtually the best team in the league, and with a little help from God, the pennant would have been theirs. I don't believe it is a coincidence that they lost the same year that Minnesota decided to sell liquor on Sundays." To which the Sports Illustrated writer adds, "In Boston, where the Red Sox beat the Twins, it has been permitted to sell liquor on Sundays for a long time.

You see, you encounter a Pandora's Box of problems when you try to explain every evil and problem in life as a punishment of an angry God, because there is much that cannot be explained in this way. For example, a flood, a tornado, or the little girl's death, or other illustrations we have used. Some people blame every death on God. How often do we hear, "God has taken our loved one." What they are really saying is, 'God kills people.' Can you believe that?

God is a God of life. Dying is a part of life. Certainly death comes - in many cases as a great friend to an old worn out body. But to blame every death on God is to make God into a heartless murderer, which certainly is not in harmony with the kind of God we see in Jesus Christ.

Let us draw the arguments of these people concerning the will of God to their logical conclusion.

A little girl playing barefoot in the back yard steps on a rusty can and almost dies of tetanus. Now to believe this was the will of God for whatever reason, I would have to believe that God put a germ on the edge of that can and arranged for the little girl to step on it.

Now think of the three arguments that they give. What good is possibly worth that price? What lesson is there to be learned so important that it requires that kind of a sacrifice? And what sin did that little girl commit to make God so vengeful?

I have a good friend, a chaplain who was stationed at an air base in California, John Fritz, I visited him not too long ago. I was sent to Japan and John went to Alaska. It wasn't too long that I had heard the news that John was afflicted with polio. This was just before Jonas Salk discovered the vaccine. John was paralyzed from the neck down and he has been all these years. He lives his life in a wheel chair. Now if I am to believe that it is the will of God, that John became paralyzed; then I must believe that God intentionally inflicted him before the cure was discovered. Some would say this could happen, I say it is barbaric. They say this was done so he could be an inspiration to others. And he has been. He is an associate pastor in an area in Chicago, serving his church and his God out of his home. Certainly he is an inspiration to others, but to say that is why it happened is nonsense. When we are talking about God as Christians, we are talking about our Creator, and this God would not have to stoop to such a crude way of making this man's life an inspiration. He was an inspiration before this happened. Inspiration has come of it, but God has more creative ways of introducing inspiration into life than through evil.

Take the child on the tricycle. If this is God's will, then God arranged it so that the child, the father, the car and the tricycle all came together at the same time to snuff out the life of the child. Now this makes God the author of devastation and evil.

I cannot love a God like that, I can't do it!

Therefore how can a Christian view evil vs the will of God in any other way? What is the alternative if such examples are not God's will? Where does the responsibility lie?

I want to make several suggestions, and I don't pretend to have answers that will satisfy everyone. **First, I believe God's creation is governed by many natural and moral laws.** And these laws are good for our well being. People could not live without them, without the law of gravity, without heat, without forms of energy. I am now listing the physical laws that govern our world and our universe. But these laws also kill, or the results of them can, if we abuse them.

I have a favorite stretch of highway that supersedes all others I have ever seen. I like Trailridge Road in Rocky Mountain Park. It's about 100 miles north of Denver. If you have never been there, you ought to drive there sometime. There is long stretch of tundra, above the tree line. It is spectacular, with hairpin turns and hardly any guard rails. Now a man driving 75 miles an hour down Trailridge Road is in trouble. The law of gravity is going to catch up with him and probably kill him. But that doesn't make the law of gravity a bad law. If we didn't have it, we would probably be floating off into space like the astronauts in a capsule.

Germs and viruses are all a part of the total web of life. Some of them are quite deadly. However some of them has been transformed into the power of healing, such as penicillin. They bring healing or they may bring death. When we catch a cold, do we say, we are afflicted with God's will? Or when a child dies of leukemia or kidney failure, we try to smooth over the tragedy and say it is God's will. Why blame God for all of the tragedies of life?

We don't know why his creations are good and evil for humans. Maybe God's creation is just not yet completed? Maybe God depends on us to assist in its completion? But let's be honest and admit there are many things we don't know rather than by trying to make God appear good by being the author of evil.

Second suggestion, some things happen because of our limitations. As we read in the 8th Psalm we are given dominion over creation. But we have to work to achieve this. And we are working at it with more progress in the past 50 years than we made in the 2000 year period before that. But we are still in a very primitive state. My friend John, who had polio, was a victim of man's limitations. The vaccine wasn't discovered until several years later. The little child on the tricycle was a victim of man's limitations, the limitation that cars are not built with better visibility, and we are working at it. Or limitations can arise because of poor judgment, carelessness, or of haste.

Third suggestion, things happen because of man's wickedness. Some claim man is basically good. I can come up with several thousand examples which will shoot that claim full of holes. Just read the morning papers.

People are composites of good and evil and often evil dominates. I had the privilege this past year of being at both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, visiting the museums of our ingenuity - of man's evil. That was not God's will. It's never God's will to destroy life. War is the result of man's evil, not God's will; even if we would like to pretend that God is on our side. Much of the evil in our lives is the end result of sin. That is why God sent Jesus Christ and this is the good news of the Gospel.

Why is there evil in our lives? The answer is very complex and often we have no answer. I believe evils are results of our abuse of the laws of nature, or our human limitations, or our sins.

Why does evil happen? Because we are human and we are not God. Because of our human limitations, we can't always give a satisfactory answer. However let us not try to get off the hook by blaming God all the time. This alternative is not open to a mature Christian.

Be rest assured of this - God stands with the person of faith in the face of all evil.

The last two verses of Romans 8, one of the greatest verses of Scripture, **“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** That's good enough answer for me.

God comes to us, not always to create nor erase the evil, but to help us respond to it in an affirmative way. God reassured the parents of the little child “I will not leave you comfortless in my father's house of many mansions. I have preserved her life. Here there may be healing.”

In the case of my crippled chaplain friend, his life is dedicated to the service of others and is an inspiration to everyone who knows him. How a handicapped person can be used as God's instrument of reconciliation and healing in a broken world. In these situations, life was torn apart by evil, God was not responsible for this tragedy, but he is responsible for assisting and putting these lives back together, lives of faith.

If a person is willing to call upon God, this is the kind of God I see in our Lord. Not the kind of God who plays sadistic games with our lives, but one who enters into our lives and shares our lives, good and bad. One whom Jesus called Father, his mercy is unending. His compassion is limitless. His help is always available. And into the hands of this God, Jesus with his last breath committed himself on the cross. We can commit our lives to him, and be prepared for both the good and the bad that certainly will come.

